W E R E M E M B E R

Pioneering in Alberta With Oxen

First slides Wm. Parker

By
William Wilder McKinley Parker

It was in 1935 that I last saw a steer hitched to a cart in Alberta, far west near the foothils of the Rockies in an outlying, sparcely-settled, timbered area. It was a very odd sight then as I sped along the Jasper highway in a new V 8 Ford. But it is much earlier in the history of the province that one must look to find the pioneers using oxen. I remember the last team of oxen in the Edmonton district, but that was during the first great war, about 1915, a good thirty years ago.

It seems only yesterday that I drove this team, sometimes it was a three-ox team, and even made the trip from Stony Plain to Glenevis- Cherhill district north of Lac Ste Anne. We had a rangy type of oxen and made rather good time upon the road but on long trips, the very wily beasts used turn into every gate or lane when they got tired or weary. However, we used them four years during our homesteading in Alberta, and they did all manner of pioneer work. And there never was a cheaper fed team on any farm, who kept well in sub-zero or summer weather. The oxen were best upon the plow, especially when the virgin soil contained the odd rock. We found them at their worst--- just a trifle too slow----- upon the binder.

We named our ox team---- for that matter why should not they be named, the cows all had names------and our youngest ox was called Tommy Atkins. The other old standbys were Spot and Charlie, and oh, boy, could they pull! I've often wished for a horse since 1915 that would draw on a load like that team would dig in and pull!

We had no fences at first; some neighbors often searched in one direction in the untouched bush for their horses and they hunted in another direction for their cows. But if we heard our cow-bells to the southward, there usually we found too our oxen. However, once we had to blow a dinner horn and ring a big cow-bell in the timber to bring them home. It did! The cows and oxen both were very curious about this bit of magic and came tearing through the woods on the run, tails high in the air.

We never drove our oxen without lines; using a yoke / many pioneers did!. A fellow once related to me how his ox-team took him into a big pond of water at the end of a furrow on a very hot day and stood there for more than an hour. They would not budge, though he yelled himself hoarse, trying to get them started again. No "Gee" and "Haw" for me, give me the bits in their mouths and a pair of tough leather lines for quicker action; yes, yelling soon wore a man out, too.

One day when we were haying the team ran away---- it is seldom you ever hear of an ox-team running. They left Steve, sprawled in the rough meadow, far behind the mower.

He yelled at me, "Stop that team!" I gasped at the sight. The mower was cutting a swath like a streak of lightning and the oxen were on the gallop, an unusual sight.

When the team was caught and tied up, I asked Steve why he was abusing or scaring our pets like that.

"Hornets!" he exclaimed. "They bumped me off right in a hornets' nest!"

"So that's what all this excitement is about," I replied.

It was at Glenevis, Alberta, that we homesteaded in 1913 and for nearly five years, we used oxen as our only motive power here, twenty miles north of Stony Plain. But when we purchased our first binder we decided they were a bit too slow and that ended our "oxomobile".

Before the departure of the oxen from the scene, however, my brother, Steve, wished to develop the idea that hornets made the oxen go faster. He fastened a telephone battery under his seat on the binder, and connecting each ox's tail by a wire to the battery, he gave it a turn occasionally instead of trying to reach the team with a whip. Sad to say, ~~the oxen~~ although they did not like the idea at all, the oxen could not be electrified or terrified. This system did have the effect of starting the team quickly but they soon were tired and then settled down to their regular pace.

We used to enjoy seeing the oxen, turned loose at meal times, on a hillside covered with tall peavine, their long tongues rolling in tons of this sweet, wild legume. But work and Alberta sunshine will give anyone an appetite! The oxen thrived on good, wild, Alberta grass or hay the year round, and received grain chop only as a special treat. This made our use of oxen a most economical venture.

(If you do not wish to print this article on oxen soon in Folklore, please copy it and send my copy back to me.) (This is all true, not a tall tale.)

(I left you page one, as well as a cut of the oxen hauling a load of hay.) (A good title for this cut, "Like Pa Did It in 1915."

We Remember.

Slide 1 Hauling birch log to sawmill.
" 2 Resting while waiting to take family to church
" 3 Breaking in a young pair of steers.
" 4 Three oxen harrowing
" 5 Single ox raking hay
" 6 Hauling in feed for winter
" 7 Harvesting the potatoes
" 9 Riding bareback, rough and tough!
" 10 Another load of logs for the new house Mumber.
" 11 Young calves
" 12 Feeding time for the chicks.
" 13 " " " Babe
" 14 Darrdy, a new pony, one day old
" 15. The old School Pony
" 16 Bill's First Log Cabin
" 17 The kids creek swimming hole
" 18 Guarding the duckling
" 19 The winter sawmill
" 20 40 bu. to the acre wheat
" 21 The horse replaces the ox.

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Waskatenau, Alberta.
Dec. 31, 1943.

I Remember

(True pioneering, sometimes stranger than fiction)

Crash! Bang! Bumpty, bump! Oh yes, I remember; we were sitting in the coach of a mixed construction train when it happened. I was returning from Onoway with a car of lumber for my new homestead house. The coach door flew open and out tore the conductor to the platform. The train pulled on. Chug! Chug! Chug! Rolling along over the mud grade, up and down, like a ship on a rough sea. Finally we came to an abrupt stop.

"A car is off, tearing up the track!" yelled the trainmen, as we followed the conductor to the car vestibule.

"Slush; such mud and slime!" complained someone as we hurried along the train to the crippled boxcar. The trainmen carried some special mechanism to clamp on the track and after

working for a long time, first at the front trucks and then with back wheels of the car, they had the locomotive give it short pulls. It seemed they were just about to succeed, when over-toppled the freight car, not on top of them, but one end swung around, and, there it lay, half in the mud of the ditch and half across the track.

"I suppose we'll have to get some section men, now. I'll climb a post and phone for some help," said the conductor.

"Yes, they'll have move the track around that car," declared the brakeman. "In the meantime, some of us may as well unload that car, and put the stuff into another one."

It was still sprinkling, the end of a three-day rain. Yes, it used to rain like that back in 1912 in Alberta. We waded, all of us passengers, past the upset car and prepared to help, for we wanted to get the train moving.

We were cold and were anxious to get home. The trainman broke the seal and opened the free car door.

"Lumber!" I yelled, "Lumber, my lumber!" There in the car were the boards and shingles, which I had helped pile in so carefully. Now the boards were anything but in order; some were crisscross, some were broken, Such a mess!

"And so this is railroading," suggested a helper as we worked.

"This is pioneering in Alberta, sunny Alberta!" Confided another man, who was carrying boards from the wrecked car.

"Yes, in sunny Alberta, where the rainfall is ample and sufficient," I rejoined, as I struggled to dislodge ten pounds of clay mud which clung to each rubber boot.

Before we finished transferring the load of lumber to

other cars the trackmen came and moved the rails over about three or four feet in the soft mud. We scraped our feet and clambered aboard again and were soon on our way, as the "Muskeg Rattler" wound its devious pathway through the Indian reserve, past the wigwams of the Crees.

Yes, on west and north for civilization must continue to move forward.

Soon the conductor called, "Glenevis". That was my stop. It was pretty name. But that was all it was. There was not a single building yet. Just a slashing in the trees.

And now all hands unloaded my lumber again. It was a good thing I had a lunch with me for it was midnight before I reached my tent on the N. W ¼ of section twelve that night.

By Wm. W. Parker.